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Hidden Communication Skills Revealed! – The career skills that make you stand out
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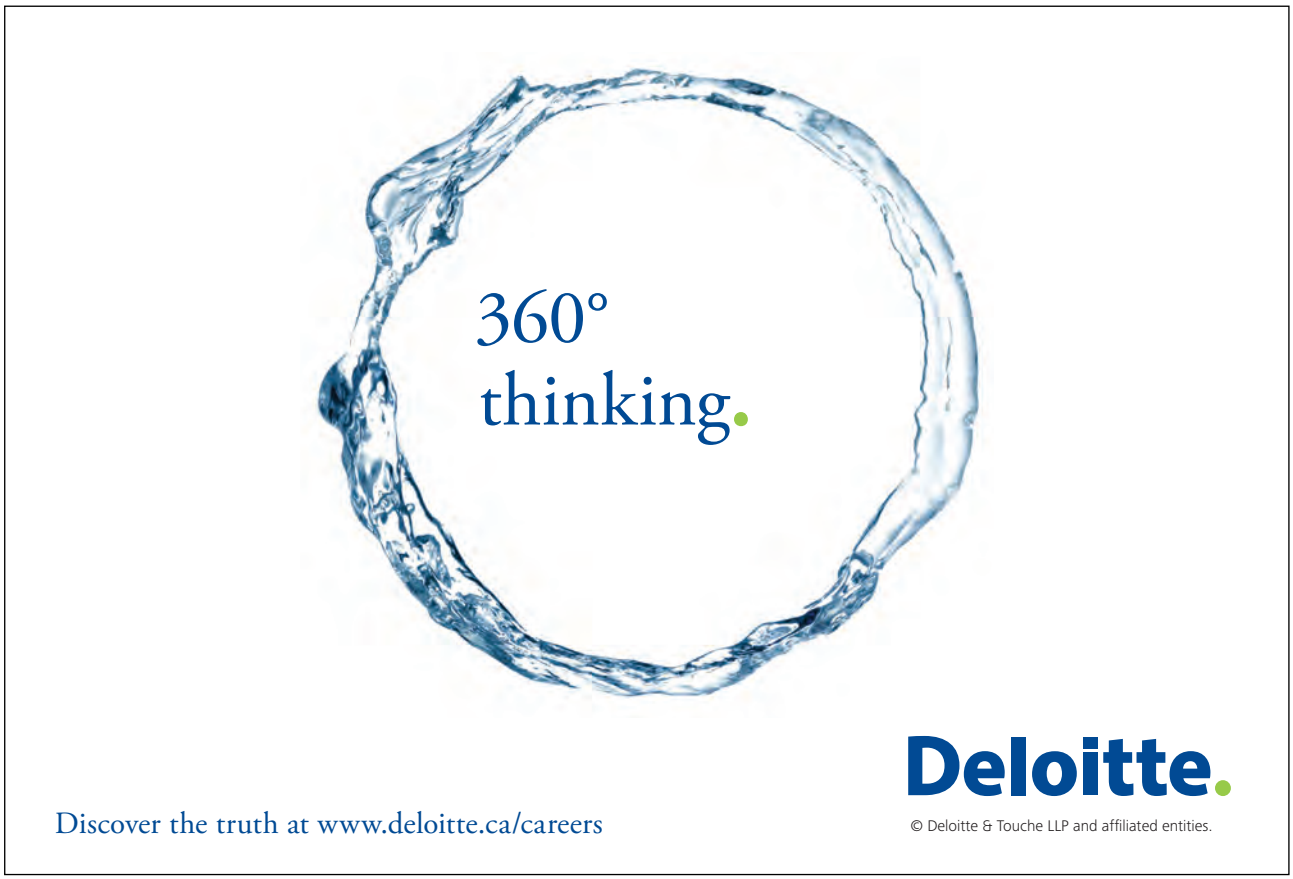

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Preface

Most suveys into what employers want in their staff would result in a similar list. Employers are looking for people who are good at:

- Teamwork
- Communication
- Self-motivation
- Planning and organising
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Time management and prioritising
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Willingness to learn
- Interpersonal and negotiating skills

This e-book will help you with one of the most important of these – communication. There are numerous books on basic communication skills but this e-book looks at some which are often overlooked. Rarely do we find any training and development on these topics, yet mastery of these skills can help you to stand-out in the workplace. **Interpersonal communication** relates to the ways in which we send and receive messages by interacting with others. It's about visual and verbal communication which, in a business sense, is every bit as important as written communication. So here you'll find useful advice on such critical interpersonal communication skills as: listening effectively; questioning; assertiveness and body language.

Apex Leadership Limited was founded by Anthony Sturgess and Phil Higson. They have a long track record of developing innovative and challenging management and leadership development interventions, including programmes which have won national awards. From several MBA programmes to tailored, client specific programmes, Anthony and Phil have worked with new and experienced managers, in a wide range of organisations, across a breadth of management and leadership roles.

Anthony Sturgess has almost twenty years experience in the teaching, facilitation and coaching of managers and leaders. This experience ranges from individual leadership and management development to leading organisational change.

Anthony has worked with a wide range of managers from small and large organisations. More widely, he has worked within client organisations, using an internal consultancy approach to create tailored development solutions and programmes. These have supported numerous public and private sector organisations to successfully develop their managers, to achieve effective change, and to realise genuine organisational improvements.

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Phil Higson is a published author and active researcher, with over 25 years experience in business and management education as lecturer, course developer, manager, external examiner and consultant. He has worked mainly in UK universities although he has also consulted or taught in France, Russia and Hong Kong.

A former MBA course leader, Phil has also written research articles and conference papers exploring the role of business schools in workplace management development. Before becoming an educator, Phil worked in several small and large organisations, in both the UK and Australia.

This combination of management experience in small and large organisations, in both private and public sectors, has given Phil a wide ranging perspective on work and management. Phil has authored or created numerous training and development tools and is experienced in managing large projects to support management and leadership development in a range of organisations.

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Or you can visit the major online resource developed by Apex Leadership at:
The Happy Manager – helping you find a better way to manage.
Alternatively see their new site Defining Leadership – leadership resources for resourceful leaders.

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1 Introduction

Most suveys into what employers want in their staff would include communication and interpersonal skills. Ironically some of the most important interpersonal skills for work and life are never taught.

What we say, how we say it, how we listen, the questions we ask, our demeanour, actions and movement are all the stuff of interpersonal communication. Too often we take them for granted yet effective interpersonal communication skills matter to us all, in any situation. In the workplace, they can be critical.

There are several very good reasons for improving your interpersonal skills. It will help you to:

- Better understand and interpret what others are communicating.
- Be clearer about their communication needs in order to more effectively get through to them.
- Improve the effectiveness of your own communication, increasing your influence and impact at work.

Better interpersonal communication skills make sense!

But how do you start to improve your skills in this area? Well it helps to remember two basic things about human behaviour:

1. People react to other people's behaviour.
2. A change in your behaviour can change their reaction.

What does this tell you and how can you use it to enhance your career development? It tells you that your ability to communicate and to influence others can depend on several things. The way you respond to someone else, how you listen, what you say, the way you say it and the body language you use. Learning how to develop these is a significant skill, both at work and in your everyday life.

This e-book will help you to develop key interpersonal communication skills to make you more effective in the workplace. Having knowledge and understanding of some of these tips will also help you get that job in the first place.

The book explores four essential interpersonal communication skills. We'd call them foundational skills which are used in many other communication activities. They are:

- Active listening
- Body language skills

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- Assertiveness
- Questioning skills

The book begins with active listening skills – too often this is a skill that is taken for granted, yet of all the interpersonal skills this is potentially the most powerful. The key principle and argument for being better at listening is this: in order to be understood you first need to understand. That means you need to learn *how to listen*.

Closely associated with listening is how we communicate through our demeanour and actions. That is, *how we use body language*. It's often said that actions speak louder than words. It's certainly the case that we communicate much more than we realise by our body language. Find out how to improve your communication through your body language, and the crucial need for matching your body language with your verbal language.

Listening skills and body language are important because they will help you to communicate more effectively but getting your message across may take something more. How often have you felt frustrated because you don't manage to put your points over, in discussions or in meetings? Learning *how to be assertive* is another critical interpersonal communication skill. Assertiveness can be a misunderstood term, often being mistaken for over-confidence. But developed properly, assertiveness skills enable you to communicate your ideas and enthusiasm in a confident, effective manner, whilst still respecting someone else's view and perspective.

The final topic in our core interpersonal skills works hand-in-hand with each of the others. The art of questioning is another skill area that is easily taken for granted. There is much more to questioning than you would initially think. In this section of the book you will find out about the different kinds of questions you can ask, and their relative power. The different types of questions are brought together in a section on questioning tactics, which will help you think about how to combine different types of questions.

Each section has a useful summary which brings together the key elements discussed. You can use these summaries as a reminder or as development tools to help improve your interpersonal communication skills.

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2 Active listening

Are you a good listener? Of all the skills you might use to communicate, listening seems the most straightforward. Yet *really* listening, carefully and accurately, is a demanding activity. In practice, active listening is more than just listening. It starts with paying careful attention to what the other person is saying. This may seem obvious but ask yourself, how often do you pay total attention to what someone is saying?

The ability to listen is a powerful but understated skill. It's especially important for supervisors, team-leaders and managers, who might be tempted to think that, first and foremost, you should be listened to, In actual fact, the opposite is actually more important. Because:

> *If you want to be listened to ....*
> *.... first learn to listen!*

Sounds easy? Maybe, but in practice most people have to work very hard at listening well.

2.1 What is active listening?

Active listening is defined as:

- *"The act of alert intentional hearing, interpretation, and demonstration of an interest in what a person has to say through verbal signal, nonverbal gestures, and body language."* (Mosby's Medical Dictionary)
- *Listening to what is "said" verbally and non-verbally. Active listening is a two-way process with listener interpreting with questions and summarising skills, and with non-verbal communication.*

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The active elements refer to being aware of body language, then accurately interpreting what is said by using summarising and questioning skills. Active listening can have some important benefits.

2.2 Why listen actively?

- ✓ Listening to others means you are more far more likely to be listened to.
- ✓ If you listen to your colleagues you will find out what "makes then tick".
- ✓ It builds positive relationships as colleagues feel they are properly understood.
- ✓ Listening is a core skill in a wide range of management activities.
- ✓ It helps to avoid misunderstandings.
- ✓ It develops your own self-confidence.

2.3 What does active listening involve?

Active listening requires you to do more than just stop talking or stand still. To be an effective active listener you need also to:

- Clear your mind of distractions
- Watch carefully
- Respond with comments and questions
- Use appropriate body language.

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Clear you mind of distractions

Clearing your mind of distractions can be difficult. Really listening to someone requires effort and concentration. Before any meeting where you know you'll need to actively listen, consciously give yourself some preparation time. Take the time and effort to "park":

- ✓ Whatever issues you have just been dealing with, and
- ✓ Whatever you know you need to do next.

Watch Carefully

Watching carefully involves being aware of the body language of the other person. Think about their use of language, emotion, facial expression, eye contact, posture, and body movements. These non-verbal responses can give you an idea of what the person is thinking and feeling. It also helps you to interpret where the speaker is placing emphasis, indicating what is most important about the message they are trying to communicate.

Respond with Comments

Responding with comments and questions lets the other person know that you are listening and trying to understand.

It's particularly important to play back to them what you thought they said. This has two important benefits. It:

- Allows you to check that you have understood correctly.
- It allows them to "hear" what they have said and to immediately correct or clarify.

Hearing comments from the listener can often gives the speaker the opportunity to reflect on what they said. This can also sometimes help them make sense of what they meant to say.

Use Appropriate Body Language

Using appropriate body language helps you to respond to the other person in a non-threatening and supportive manner. Just as the speaker's body language helps you to more clearly understand their message, your own body language is a powerful way to convey that you are actively listening. Body language is considered in more detail in a later section.

2.4 When to use active listening

Listening skills are central many workplace situations and to almost all management activities. For example, managers will need good listening skills when engaged in:

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Coaching -
Action learning sets
Handling conflicts
Influencing others
Delegating
Managing performance and conducting appraisals
Sharing a vision

Take "sharing a vision" for example. US leadership thinkers, Kouses and Posner, place a clear emphasis on the importance of listening in that critical activity:

"The best way to lead people into the future is to connect with them deeply in the present. The only visions that take hold are shared visions – and you will create them only when you listen very, very closely to others, appreciate their hopes, and attend to their needs."

(Kouses and Posner: To lead create a shared vision Harvard Business Review, 2009)

In many situations, if you want your voice to be heard you need to first listen! And having listened, you are then in a much better position to more clearly decide what to do next.

2.5 Limitations

As simple and obvious as some of this may seem, active listening is anything but an easy option. Whilst it is undoubtedly a crucial skill, it is challenging, requires practice and no little concentration. This may explain why it's not used as often or as effectively as it could be.

Another important limitation is that active listening works best with on a one-to-one or small group basis. It's less effective with larger numbers of people, due to distractions and difficulties in focusing when with larger groups.

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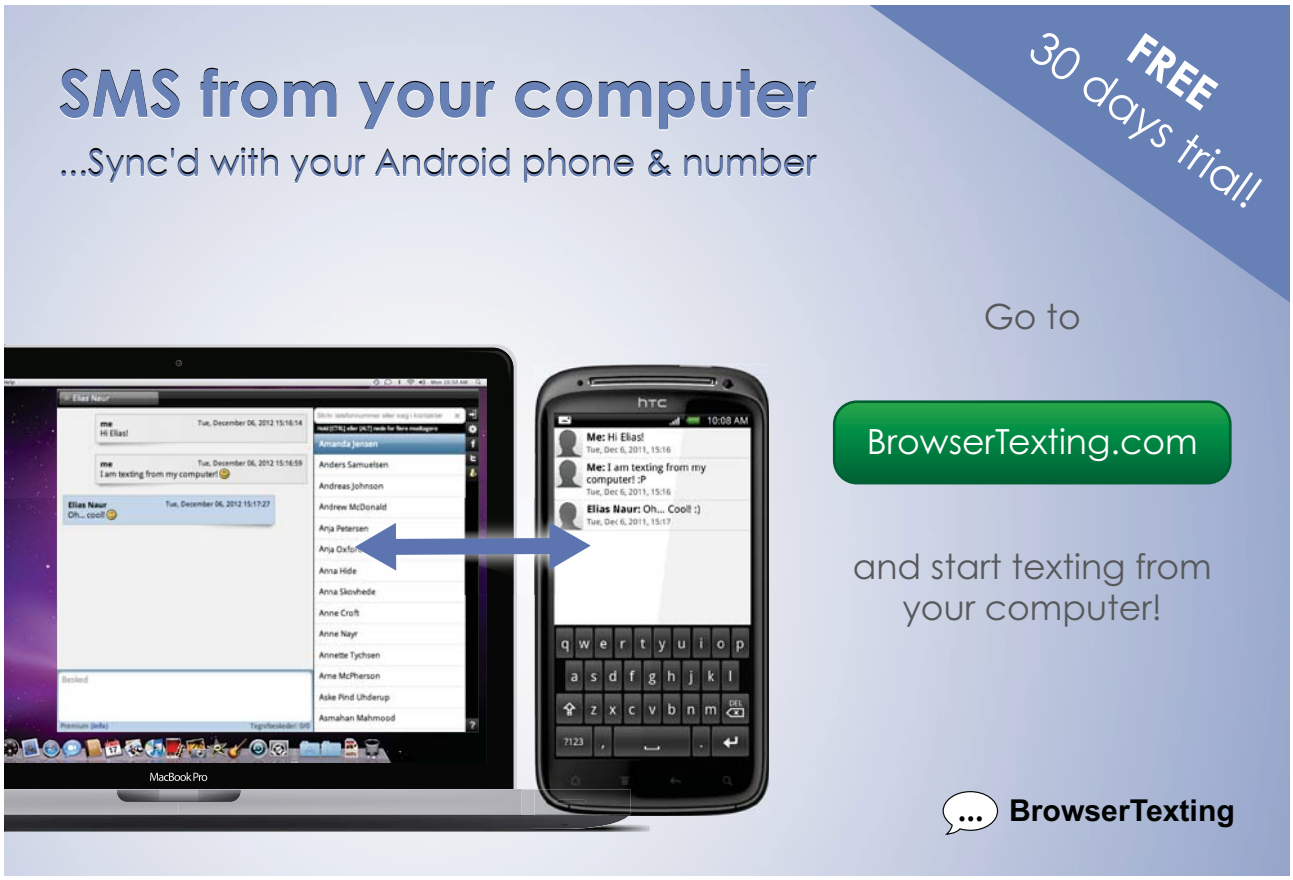
Some of the listening techniques can still be applied in larger group situations. It's still important to clear the mind before the discussion, to concentrate on what is being said, and to pay attention to the speaker's body language. However it's far more difficult to practice paraphrasing and summarising to build and check understanding.

Whilst active listening may have some limitations, it is nonetheless a very powerful technique. And one that is not used enough in life or in the workplace. The American author and journalist, Ernest Hemingway captured this point well when he said:

> *"I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen."*

2.6 The evidence behind active listening

Active listening skills are important for interpersonal relations and for effective management. But just how important are they? In 1957, U.S. academic Ralph G. Nichols wrote an article which quoted a manager attending an executive seminar on listening skills. The quote reflected on how critical listening is to the work of a manager:



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"I think that perhaps 80% of my work depends on my listening to someone, or on someone else listening to me."

It could be argued that interpersonal communication at its simplest is about listening, or about being listened to. The problem is, listening skills don't often feature in management development programmes. Perhaps they seem too obvious. As the former CEO of Chrysler Corporation, Lee Iacocca once said:

> "I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. Business people need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realize that real communication goes in both directions."

Nichols, had already attempted to do what Iacocca suggested: to teach people how to listen. Author of the book: "Are You Listening?", Nichols is credited with founding the academic study of "listening". He re-counts how he began his 40-year career in the study of listening:

> "I began my career as a high school speech teacher and debate coach. As my debaters improved their listening skills, I discovered they improved their persuasive skills."

Amongst many observations made by Nichols, three underpin the value of listening:

- The most basic of all human needs is to understand and to be understood.
- The best way to understand people is to listen to them.
- We are at the mercy of those who understand us better than we understand them.

What do these insights mean for your career development? Nichols suggested two important conclusions from his observations:

- To understand others gives us an advantage.
- The more we listen, the more persuasive we become.

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So, it's advantageous for us all to understand the people we work with. By learning to listen properly, we learn to understand more fully. And once we do this, we can improve our own communication skills. This in turn means we can become more persuasive in our own arguments, and more effective in our work and in our career progression.

2.7 Active listening skills: your own experiences

Finally, a good place to start if you want to improve your active listening skills is to reflect on your own experiences. For example:

- Think about any times when you feel you've really been listened to.
- How did that make you feel?
- What difference did it make to the way you performed?

Now compare this with occasions when you feel you've not been heard properly:

- How many times have you recognised that someone hasn't really been listening to you?
- How did it make you feel?
- What difference would someone really listening to you have made?

There is an argument to suggest that just being willing to listen can be enough. Often this might go a long way to resolving concerns or issues with your colleagues, staff or your own managers.

But if you're going to the effort of listening in the first place, you might as well do it properly! So think about your active listening skills. Because, as noted psychologist Carl Rogers once said:

> "Man's inability to communicate ...
>
> ...is a result of his failure to listen effectively."

2.8 Summary of active listening

Whilst listening is of course something we do naturally, active listening requires focus and practice. Take time to think through the ideas in this section, and make a plan to improve your active listening skills.

Below is a helpful summary of active listening which you can use it as:

- A checklist – to remember what's need to become an active listener.
- A planner – to plan an activity to improve your active listening
- A review – to use the 7 areas in the summary to review a situation where you've tried to apply active listening.

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Be present	• Focus on listening to your colleague(s) Remove distractions from your mind
Listen	• Carefully and accurately to what is said, and to the feelings being conveyed
Watch carefully	• Be aware of body language, voice tone, facial expressions, hand-gestures, eye contact, body posture
Respond with comments	• Paraphrase to build understanding. Summarise to check understanding
Use body language	• Use your body language to demonstrate support and understanding
Questions	• Use questions to help the speaker explore their own thinking
Seek	• To understand first, then to help the speaker decide on their own actions

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3 From listening to speaking

Hand-in-hand with good listening skills is the need to demonstrate that you fully understand what you have heard. Next we consider some tips for speaking effectively after you've heard the message. how building empathy whilst listening can be another key interpersonal communication skill.

Your contribution to the conversation can both show that you are listening, and help the speaker "listen" to themselves. Responding to what the speaker is saying demonstrates that you have been listening. It also builds a rapport with the speaker, showing empathy through an accurate understanding of the message. The following techniques will help you to:

- Demonstrate you are listening.
- Check understanding.
- Convey empathy.
- Summarise, allowing the other person to progress to other points.
- Help the other person to "hear" what they are saying.

> "When you hear yourself talk, you see more clearly what matters ...
>
> ... and what you had hoped to say."
>
> (US academic Karl Weick).

3.1 Speak up

1. **Restate** important elements of what the speaker has said, so you can both check if you've understood what they meant. It's also very useful for the speaker to hear their view being expressed back to them. This will allow them to reflect on whether that's exactly what they had meant to say, or indeed whether the emphasis was what they had intended. It is often only when we hear aloud what we think that we begin to understand what we meant!
2. **Paraphrase** by using different words but still maintaining the same meaning. In practice this involves putting back to a person what they have said in a different way. Paraphrasing helps you to do two things. It:

    a) Shows you have understood
    b) Clarifies meaning by expressing something differently.

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It's helpful to paraphrasing periodically during the conversation, and especially when it appears something significant is emerging in the discussion.

3. **Summarise** by providing a short account which highlights the main points of the conversation so far. This can be a great way to condense the main points of someone's view. It checks understanding, and allows the person to move to another point or to reflect on what their position is.
4. **Use your voice** to signify you acknowledge the points being made. Using "mm mm" "ahhh" or a short "yes I see" can be particularly helpful to demonstrate empathy and assurance that you are listening, and have taken their points in to consideration.
5. **Signal** by signposting what you are going to talk about before you do – a very useful way to start a response or a conversation. This allows the other person to subconsciously prepare for the discourse. It can also be a very useful way to broach tricky subjects. For example, starting a sentence with "There's a tricky/difficult matter I'd like to talk to you about…. Or let me suggest this idea as a way forward… or I'm going to play devil's advocate here….
6. **Mind your language** by avoiding words that others may interpret in a negative way. Here are three to think about:
    a) "Why" is often seen as a critical word (why did you do that?). You can often use other words to effectively still ask "why".

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b) "But" can also signal a negative.
c) "Parental" words should be avoided. For example avoid "should", "ought" or "with respect".

4. **Think** about what you are going to say before you start talking. Although it's important to use these techniques, it's worth remembering the old adage. It's better to be quiet and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt! So, reflect on what is being said, marshall your thoughts, then express them.
5. **Breathe** before you speak. This may seem obvious but if you're not used to public speaking, or get nervous when talking in a work setting, getting your breathing right can make all the difference. Taking a deep breath before you speak, and remembering to continue whilst engaged in conversation, can help in two ways. Firstly, it will make you feel more confident. Try it! Secondly, it will ensure your voice is firm, full and most important of all, heard.

There is clearly much that you can convey to the other person by what you contribute to the conversation. How you use your part of the conversation is crucial to being an active listener. But of course there is another kind of language which is just as important as what you say, perhaps more so. That is *your* body language.

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4 Body language skills

In this section we will explore the subtle yet powerful skill of using your body language. We will do this by thinking about

- What we mean by body language.
- Why body language skills matter.
- Body language and active listening.
- Body language and making a presentation.
- Congruency: when body language matches words.

So how is body language defined? Here are some dictionary definitions:

Body language is....

- Conveying information through the conscious or unconscious use of bodily gestures.
- The conscious and unconscious movements and postures by which attitudes and feelings are communicated. (Oxford dictionaries)

4.1 Body Language skills

Body language matters. Before you open your mouth to say anything, your body has already spoken volumes. In fact, if you're not careful, before you say anything your body language may already have sent out the wrong message!

Various researchers suggest that upwards of 50% of our communication is by our body language. Using appropriate body language helps you to respond to the other person in a non-threatening and supportive manner. Remember that body language is a natural part of communication; we all do it, and can all do it better.

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Our body language is important and can have a significant impact in a variety of settings. Think about how body language matters when:

- Arriving at an interview and meeting those who are about to interview you for the first time.
- Standing up at a business meeting to present your ideas or to report on a task.
- Trying to build a relationship with a potential new customer for your business.

Think about the well-known saying:

"You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

As far as body language is concerned you are often making that first impression loud and clear before you have even spoken.

4.2 What do we mean by body language?

When we refer to body language in the workplace we normally mean the messages we convey by:

Voice tone

Eye contact / movement

Facial expression

Gestures

Posture and body movement

Here are some things to think about in relation to each of these elements of body language:

- **Voice tone**
  Is it measured? How do we convey interest? Is it too rushed? Do we vary pace and volume? Are we conveying confidence and assurance? Do we want to share a passion and enthusiasm for the topic?

- **Eye contact/movement**
  Do we engage with those with whom we are talking? Are we avoiding eye contact? Are we ensuring we share eye contact if there are several people present?

- **Facial expression**
  Think about what your facial expression might be giving away. Is it appropriate to the message you are conveying verbally?

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- **Gestures**
  Are you conscious of your hand movements? Using appropriate hand gestures to place emphasis can be very powerful.

- **Posture and body movement**
  Your posture will also convey meaning. If you are presenting, does it seem that you are rooted to the spot, perhaps in fear and trepidation? Equally, smaller, repetitive movements can be distracting. Adopting a relaxed but appropriate stance means people will focus on the message, not the movement.

4.3 Why Body language skills matter

We would not expect to be proficient in another language without plenty of practice. Yet developing our body language skills is something we rarely consciously practice. However it's definitely worth improving those skills because:

- "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said." (Peter Drucker)
- We need to learn to speak body language: "I speak two languages, Body and English." (Mae West)
- Over 50% of what you communicate is by your body language.
- Being aware and responding to other people's body language helps you to perform better.

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- Managing your own body language can significantly enhance your communication skills.
- It can also influence how we feel. Adopting a good, positive body posture can help you both look and feel positive and confident.
- Important aspects of a manager's job (presenting, active listening, running meetings, coaching, appraisals, etc.) can be improved with better body language skills.
- It helps you build rapport with others.

Many of the tips in this guide can be applied more widely to improve your interpersonal communication skills through body language. But we'll focus next on perhaps the two most critical areas where body language matters:

4.4 Body language and active listening

Earlier we introduced the value of active listening. When you are actively listening, your body language is critical. You convey that you are listening by your own body language. For example:

- Take an open stance, or seated position (cross legs and crossed arms tend to indicate a closed uncompromising position).
- Maintain an open and relaxed disposition.
- Keep eye contact.
- Nod to signify engagement, agreement or recognition of points being made.

However there is another reason why learning how to use and interpret body language matters. Just as important as your own body language is the need to watch the body language of the person you are listening to.

- What does their voice tone and eye contact suggest?
- What signals do they convey from their hand gestures, and body posture?

There is much you can gather from what people don't say!

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4.5 Body Language and making a presentation

When making a presentation your body language is equally important:

- Body language can convey important messages in support of your presentation.
- Body language can relax you and help you to feel confident in what might be a stressful situation.

Firstly you can use body language to great effect when you present. Think about how your gestures and movements can help to make a point. For example:

- Moving forward or leaning forward can reinforce an important point you are making.
- Hand-gestures and eye movement could emphasise points or support a question that you raise.

The second point is an important one: body language is a two-way street. If you can improve your body language externally it can improve how you feel internally: your emotions. The opposite also plays its part. Poor body language could re-enforce nervousness or lack of confidence.

Some tips for getting your body language right for a presentation:

- Relax before the presentation. Do some breathing exercises – as you breathe in then out, feel your muscles relaxing.
- Think about how your body language matches what you say (eye contact, hand gestures, body movement, posture).
- Smile confidently.
- Be natural and relax. Find an open, relaxed stance which you are comfortable with.
- Divide the room in to three parts, left, middle and right. Practice spending equal time moving your head (naturally) towards each section of the room. As you do so maintain eye contact with the audience.
- Remember to keep breathing throughout the presentation. Of course we do this naturally but nerves can make us take shallow breaths. Take deep breaths before speaking which will make you sound and feel confident and authoritative.

4.6 Congruency: when body language matches words

One important aspect of body language is to be aware of congruence. Do the words being said match the body language being expressed?

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> "When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another,
> a practiced man relies on the language of the first."
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson

Incongruence is when we send mixed messages. For example: "Yeah I'm listening" is an incongruent message if it's said whilst sitting with our arms crossed, with a bored voice tone, or as we look away from the person we are supposedly listening to.

You are far more likely to succeed if you're messages are congruent – when your body language matches your words.

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"There are four ways, and only four ways, in which we have contact with the world. We are evaluated and classified by these four contacts:

what we do,

how we look,

what we say, and

how we say it."

Dale Carnegie

4.7 Body language skills a summary

Finally, here is a useful checklist to use when thinking about your own body language. Because so much of what we convey with our body language is subjective, we don't really think about it. But if you are serious about developing your interpersonal skills, there is a real need to purposefully think about your own body language.

The following table provides some pointers to help you think explicitly about the messages you are conveying with your body language. Give them some thought then perhaps enlist the help of someone you trust to provide feedback on what they observe about your body language.

Voice	• What is your tone of voice? Is it measured, assured, energetic, rich and warm; or dull monotone, fast and erratic
Hand/arm gestures	• Crossed? Open hand movements, ringing hands, pointing fingers, waving them about, by your side?
Posture	• Upright, relaxed or slouching? Head position?
Facial expressions	• Smiling, matching the feeling expressed, attentive, or frowning. Or is there a lack of expression, or a puzzled look?
Eye contact	• Keeping regular eye contact (but not so long as to irritate). Or looking down or evasive
Body movement	• Relaxed easy movements. Or fidgeting twitching, covering mouth with hand, nervous movements,

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5 Assertiveness

One very important skill which is closely linked with body language is being assertive. In this section we will think about:

- What is assertiveness?
- Why should you be assertive?
- What does assertiveness involve?
- How you make sense of what matters to you.
- The wisdom of assertiveness.
- When to use assertiveness.
- What are the limitations?

5.1 Assertiveness

How often have you found yourself leaving a meeting feeling that you never really got your point over? It may be that you spent the whole time skirting around what you considered were the real issues, but never actually discussed them.

Whether you are discussing something with a colleague, your peers, or your boss, finding a way to confidently express you view point is essential. Too often conversations and meetings end up unresolved, with the associated frustration, and often anxiety and stress.

Assertiveness is not an easy skill to master. It's sometimes mistaken for, or associated with over-confident or forceful behaviour. In reality, assertiveness is a positive, much needed interpersonal skill. It's a calm, considered way to achieve better outcomes from our conversations, discussions and meetings.

5.2 What is assertiveness?

Because assertiveness does have the potential to be misunderstood, it is helpful to define exactly what it means. Assertiveness is defined as:

- Someone who behaves confidently and is not frightened to say what they want or believe. (Cambridge Dictionaries)
- Communicating your views and feelings in a calm, direct and respectful way, whilst respecting equally the views of others.

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Assertiveness begins with the premise that your wants and needs are as important as someone else's.

Assertive people tend to be open and honest, thinking positively about themselves without lessening another person's point of view.

5.3 Why be assertive?

Being assertive can have some important benefits. It can:

- Increase the chances of your needs being met.
- Deliver better outcomes, especially in potentially difficult or demanding contexts.
- Help create the conditions where you can influence others positively – other people tend to respond to assertive behaviour in a positive way.
- Make you more effective at achieving outcomes.
- Reduce frustration – you are not left feeling you didn't say what you wanted to.
- Develops your own self-confidence.

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5.4 What does assertiveness involve?

Assertiveness is behaviour that involves:

- Expressing your needs, wants, opinions and feelings in a direct and honest way.
- Standing up for your own rights in such a way that is not aggressive, and doesn't impact on the rights of other people to express their views.
- Respecting the rights for other to have differing views.
- Arriving at outcomes which satisfy both parties/groups.

Assertive behaviour is typically characterised by:

- Being clear about what you want.
- Keeping calm and confident.
- Being aware of others' views and feelings.
- Using appropriate body language – for example standing confidently, being relaxed, maintaining eye contact, steady voice.
- Clarifying facts from opinions.

5.5 Making sense of what matters to you

One important aspect of assertiveness is using it to help make sense of what matters. Often, it's only when you and your colleagues discuss your views that you begin to fully understand both your own perspective, and theirs. As US academic Karl Weick argues:

"How can I know what I think until I see what I say? Sensegiving corresponds to the saying: When you hear yourself talk, you see more clearly what matters and what you had hoped to say."

Listen to how you make your points and express your viewpoint. Reflect on what you consider to be important. Then ask yourself how often are you able to convey positively what you actually think and feel?

5.6 The wisdom of being assertive

Weick goes on to characterise wise behaviour in organisations but we can adapt this to help us think about assertiveness. Three of his characteristics are particularly relevant to being assertive:

- **Trust** – where people respect the views of others.
- **Honesty** – people respect that you are being honest and open about your views.
- **Self-respect** – you value your own views and beliefs and put them forward as valid and entitled to be respected.

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Being assertive is a balancing act. Be wary of being *over*-assertive. One way to do this is to remember that assertiveness should start from the assumption of respect:

- Respect your own views and position that they are equally valid.
- Respect equally the views and position of others

5.7 When to use assertiveness?

Assertiveness is an interpersonal skill we should practice and use as a matter of course. But it can be particularly helpful in some specific contexts. It is especially important when:

- You are faced with difficult discussions with colleagues or managers.
- Making the case for something you want, either to your boss, and/or to other colleagues and peers.
- Chairing meetings.
- Arguing for resources.
- Influencing and persuading others.

5.8 Limitations

As important as assertiveness is, it's useful to consider some limitations. You need to be careful that you don't behave (or be perceived as behaving) in a manner which is either side of an assertive approach.

- Be careful that your assertiveness is not perceived as aggressive or over-confident behaviour. That is why it is crucial to be open and honest.
- Equally, tending towards low-assertive behaviour can be interpreted as weakness. Monitor how you hold your view whilst respecting others.

5.9 Summary of assertiveness skills

One key to being assertive is to spend some time clarifying things for yourself. Think about what your views and feelings are in relation to any given issue, before engaging with others.

Then, in communicating your position, be wary of over-confident, forceful behaviour, or of low-assertive, compromising behaviour.

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Be positive	• About yourself without lessening another person's point of view
Be clear	• About what you want, your opinions and feelings
Stand-up	• Be willing to stand-up for your rights in a non-agressive way
Respect	• The rights and views of other people
Keep	• Calm, comfortable and confident
Appropriate	• Body language; being relaxed, maintaining eye contact, steady voice
Seek	• A resolution that is "win-win"

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6 Questioning skills

The final of our essential inter-personal skill is one of the most powerful – the art of questioning. In this section we will cover the following topics:

- **What are questioning skills?**
- **What makes questioning so powerful?**
- **Why questioning skills?**
- **Breadth of questions**
- **Some questions are more important than others**
- **Questioning tactics**
- **Questions to avoid**
- **When to use**

6.1 Questioning Skills

Asking good questions is probably one of the most important workplace interpersonal skills. It's also one of the most powerful tools available to a manager. Yet it is not something we often stop and think about.

Many problem solving techniques or management tools and models really just provide structures to help us to ask good questions. We rarely give the *questions we ask* a second thought.

Yet given that these questions can be potentially very powerful, it's worth gaining a better understanding of how questions can be used effectively.

6.2 What makes questions so powerful?

So what questions do we ask, and what drives them? Sometimes we ask straightforward questions, which are relatively easy to answer. At other times, we ask more searching questions which are challenging to answer.

The kind of questions we ask will lead us in a certain direction. If we limit the scope of our questions, then we will often be limited in the kind of answers we seek or find.

Researchers have long known that asking questions which only allow a yes or no answer are inhibiting. There is far more value in asking open-ended questions, which allow the respondent to expand, explain or add value to the questioning process. The same applies to the questions we ask in the workplace.

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6.3 Why question skills

Why are questions so important? There are a number of reasons why questions matter, but perhaps the best place to start to answer this is by referring to something Einstein was quoted as saying:

> "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question; I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

Jumping to answers, or trying to find answers when we haven't taken the time to think the questions we are trying to answer, is an easy mistake to make. For those mere mortals amongst us, who are unlikely to solve problems as quickly as Einstein, here are some things to think about:

- There is a hierarchy of questions – some questions are more powerful than others.
- You can improve the quality of the questions you ask.
- Knowing how to use different types of questions can be a powerful management tool.
- Questioning skills are used in virtually every aspect of work and management – it is an underrated skill, but one that is vital to develop.

The place to start is to recognise that there are different kinds of questions and that they perform very different functions.

6.4 Breadth of questions

The first distinction that can be drawn between questions is the breadth of the question being asked. As we have already said, one common way in which questions are differentiated is whether they are open or closed.

Open questions lead to more than a one-word answer, they provide breadth and tend to start with, where, what, how, when, who or which. They are helpful for:

- Gaining more detailed and better quality information.
- Exploring ideas and opinions.
- Crystallising someone's thoughts.

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Closed questions give a narrow focus and usually provide one-word answers and, although useful in some circumstances, should be used sparingly. They usually begin with: Do you… Should…? Have…? Could…?

Nonetheless, closed questions can be helpful when;

- checking facts
- clarifying a point
- providing some direction to the information being gathered

So, the type of question being asked is important. One type of question can open up a discussion, whereas others can be used to focus and narrow. But that is not all. There is another way to think about questions, to recognise that some questions are more important than others.

6.5 Some questions are more important than others

A second, helpful way to think about questions is to appreciate that there is a hierarchy of questions.

Questions serve different purposes, there is a "pecking order", implied by the question's words:

- Powerful questions begin with **why, how or what**.

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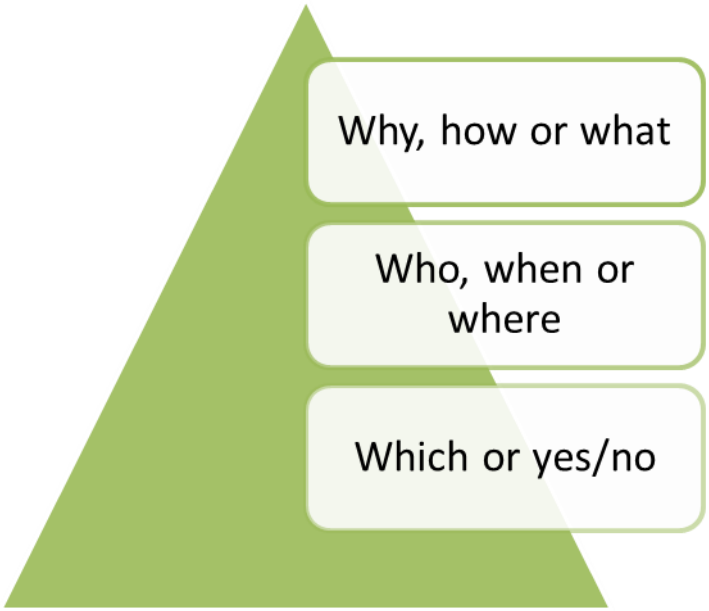
- These are followed by **who, when, where**.
- Generally, the least powerful questions are those beginning with **which**, or those that can be answered with a yes or no.



At one level you can ask questions to gather information. At a higher level you can ask questions which encourage people to think about how they would like things to change, or for more in-depth probing. For example, "how do you think they can make the changes happen?"

6.6 Questioning tactics

Questioning skills are not just about being aware of the different kinds of questions it's possible to ask. The real skill in questioning is knowing *how to use* the different kinds of questions.

You can begin to develop this skill by thinking about how you might combine different types of questions. This means being aware of how questions can complement each other, but this is not as simple as it sounds. It needs practice before the skills can really be developed.

So how do use questions effectively. One way to think about this is to focus on the purpose of the questions and be aware of the tactics you can apply when using them. Here are some common tactics you can use in asking questions. They broadly fit three kinds of questioning based on whether they are preliminary, probing or possibility questions:

1. Preliminary – Initial information and clarification of facts and feeling – mainly descriptive.
2. Probing – Progressing to probing and analysis.
3. Possibilities – Future and possibility questions.

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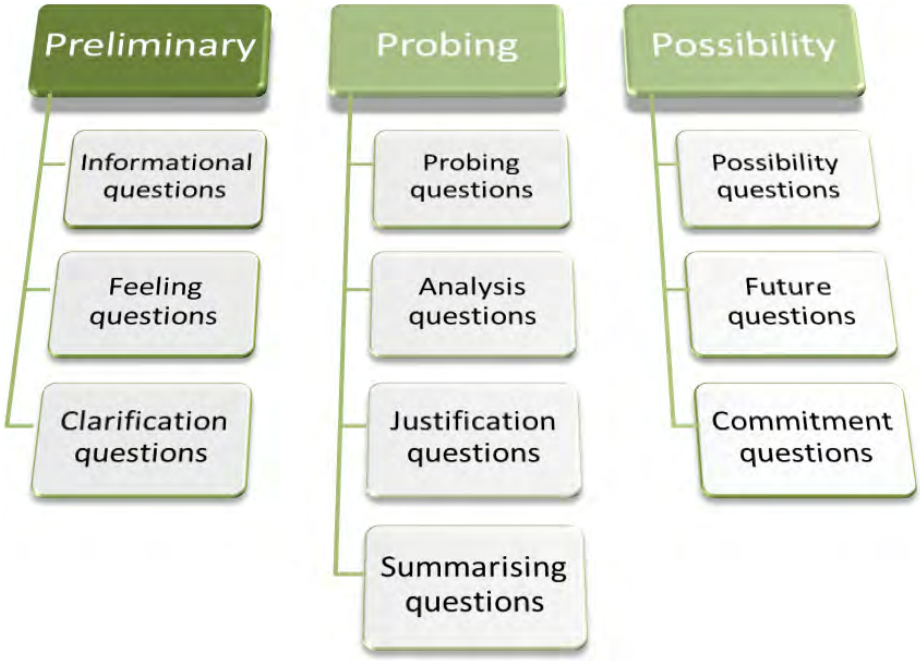

6.7 Questions to avoid

Developing your tactical awareness of which questions to use – and when, is of course an incomplete picture. You also need to be equally aware of which questions to avoid. Questions that are best avoided fall into three categories:

- **Leading questions** – where you suggest the answer in the question – "Do you think that… "Don't you think that…"
- **Multiple questions** – asking several questions at once.
- **"Why" questions** – use the word "why" sparingly because it can often be associated with sounding critical or can be a very challenging word. You can still get similar answers by choosing a different way of asking a question. For example: "tell me about…", "what do you think are the reason for…"

6.8 When to use

Good questions lie at the heart of good management whether it's coaching, giving feedback, conducting an appraisal, solving a problem, handling conflict or simply having a constructive conversation with a colleague. They are also a key interpersonal skill for anyone wishing to develop their careers and become more effective in the workplace.

- Think about the different types of question and their purpose.
- Practice asking more open questions
- Become familiar with when to use the different types of questions.

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6.9 Find out about different kinds of questions

You can find examples of questions for different management issues on the Happy Manager website for example:

- Self -performance appraisal – questions to ask yourself when reviewing your own performance
- Questions to ask at an appraisal
- Question checklist for problem solving

6.10 Question tactics check-sheet

To help develop your questions skills the following table provides some insights into the different types of questions, and some tactical approaches to use. It then provides an explanation or example of what the question is you would use are likely to be.

Questioning tactic	Explanation
Information questions	Checking facts, and what people think: "What happened." "How has it affected you"
Feeling questions	Encourage the speaker to express how they feel: "How do you feel about this…?" "How did that make you feel…?"
Clarifying questions	Brings the conversation back on track, or to check something you feel may be being glossed over: "I'm not sure I'm clear about that point…", "I'd like to hear more about …", "Do you mean…"
Probing questions	To find out more and probe after an initial point has been made to delve more deeply: "What makes you think that…", "What else…" "What do you think might explain that…"
Analysis questions	Exploring the possible reasons behind the topic you are discussing: "What do you think…?" "What do you think is the reason for that…?"
Justifying questions	To justify or explain a statement or position: "How would you explain…"
Summarising questions	Ask the speaker to summarise what they have said, helps them to reflect on what they have been saying: "How would you summarise…"

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Questioning tactic	Explanation
Possibility questions	Introduce new ideas, alternatives and options: "What if…", "How about…", "How might we…"
Future questions	Expanding on the possibilities questions to what people would like to see: "How would you like it to be…?"
Change questions	Asking for views on how change can be brought about: "What changes do you think would improve this…?"
Commitment questions	Asking people to commit and get involved. "What would it take for you to feel committed to this…?"

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7 What next?

This book has explored four essential interpersonal communication skills.

- Active listening
- Body language skills
- Assertiveness
- Questioning skills

We called them foundational skills which are used in many other communication activities. Becoming proficient in these core skills enables you to build them into more integrated communications skills such as:

- Influencing
- Persuading
- Delegating
- Coaching
- Delegating
- Praising the power of feedback
- Giving a presentation
- Handling conflict
- Facilitating
- Leading team meetings

These are discussed at more length in the companion e-book: Influential Communication Skills for Leaders.

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8 Further reading

You can find more about some of the hidden skills that help you stand out here:

Read Nichols' 1957 article on listening that we refer to in the active listening section at Listening to People.

World Café have produced an excellent guide called the Art of Powerful Questions.

An informative article about how managers use questions: The Best Management Tool ever: A Good Question.